

THE LINK - NEPAL

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Message from USAID

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) launched Linkages Across the Continuum of HIV Services for Key Populations Affected by HIV (LINKAGES) in 2014. LINKAGES is USAID and PEPFAR's largest global project focused on key populations who are at higher risk of acquiring and spreading the infection. Through PEPFAR, the U.S. Government has invested more than \$70 billion to support the HIV and AIDS response globally. Furthermore, in 2016, USAID celebrated the 30th year of commitment to combating HIV and AIDS around the world.

LINKAGES Nepal is yet another testimony of USAID's commitment to assist Nepal in achieving the ambitious UNAIDS 90-90-90¹ targets by 2020. Through LINKAGES Nepal, USAID is helping to ensure that key populations and people living with HIV can access prevention, care, support, treatment and supporting Nepal to respond to its concentrated epidemic. The initiation of LINKAGES Nepal has been very encouraging and we believe that its achievements will further pave the way toward an AIDS-free generation.

Ivana Lohar

Team Leader, Family Planning, HIV and Social Marketing
USAID Nepal

Message from FHI 360

Dear Colleagues and Friends,
I'm pleased to have the chance to write a few words about the USAID LINKAGES Nepal Project, one which builds on the decades of USAID work in Nepal to address the HIV epidemic. FHI 360 has had the privilege of contributing to the Nepal HIV response since the early 1990s as a USAID partner, working in close collaboration with the Government of Nepal and multiple networks and organizations. I feel very honored to have been a part of these efforts.

LINKAGES Nepal focuses on key populations at risk for HIV. The LINKAGES Project's vast global network provides a great opportunity to share Nepal's experience and best practices across the world and to also learn about new practices and innovations in HIV prevention, care and treatment from other countries. Congratulations to the LINKAGES Nepal team for a very successful startup of the project and we're looking forward to working with everyone on this critically important public health issue.

Jackie McPherson, Regional Director
FHI 360 Asia Pacific Region

FHI 360 Nepal Country Office is proud to be a part of the global LINKAGES Project to continue with the legacy of an evidence-based and targeted HIV program among key populations in Nepal, and to contribute to the national HIV response. I am confident that FHI 360 Nepal will be able to contribute to the success of the global LINKAGES Project as well as to provide quality HIV prevention, care, support and treatment services to key populations and people living with HIV in Nepal. I would like to congratulate and thank the LINKAGES Nepal Project team for their dedicated efforts for the initiation of the project activities and for the development of the first issue of the newsletter.

Bishnu Sapkota, Country Director
FHI 360 Nepal Country Office

Message from LINKAGES Project

On behalf of the entire LINKAGES team, I am very excited to welcome LINKAGES Nepal to the LINKAGES global family. The LINKAGES Nepal team hit the ground running with 24 sub grants awarded to local civil society organizations, including 8 organizations led by key populations, on day one of implementation. With strong partnerships with the Government of Nepal, USAID and our community partners, LINKAGES Nepal will strengthen the continuum of HIV services for key populations in Nepal and contribute to the 90-90-90 goal by 2020.

Hally Mahler, Project Director, LINKAGES Project Headquarters
FHI 360 Washington DC

We are delighted to bring you the first issue of The LINK Nepal, the LINKAGES Nepal Project's newsletter, with the successful completion of the project's first quarter. I would like to thank you all for the support and guidance you have provided in our efforts to contribute to the national HIV response.

The USAID and PEPFAR-funded LINKAGES Nepal Project initiated in October 2016, which is a part of the global LINKAGES Project and is aligned with the new National HIV Strategic Plan 2016–2021 that aims to achieve ambitious targets 90-90-90 by 2020 and ending the AIDS epidemic as public health threat in Nepal by 2030.

This issue focuses on LINKAGES Nepal Project's strategies, approaches and activities. We have also summarized key progress and achievements of the first quarter (October-December 2016) of the project's implementation.

I hope and believe that you will enjoy the newsletter and request your feedback for improvement. Thank you very much for taking your valuable time to read the newsletter.

Bhagawan Shrestha, Project Director
LINKAGES Nepal Project

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¹By 2020, 90 percent of all PLHIV will know their status; 90 percent of PLHIV will receive sustained ART; 90 percent of persons receiving ART will have viral suppression

LINKAGES Nepal Project Strategies and Approaches

The Linkages Across the Continuum of HIV Services for Key Populations Affected by HIV (LINKAGES) Project, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) is the largest global project dedicated to HIV prevention, care, support, and treatment for key populations (KPs) at risk of acquiring the infection. Managed by FHI 360 in partnership with Pact, IntraHealth International, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, LINKAGES is accelerating the ability of partner governments, KP-led civil society organizations, and private-sector providers to plan, deliver, and optimize comprehensive services to reduce HIV transmission among KPs and help those who are HIV-positive to live longer. LINKAGES is improving community outreach to KPs; promoting routine HIV testing and counseling; actively enrolling those with HIV into care, support, and treatment; and enabling them to remain in care. LINKAGES is operating in 31 countries, including Nepal.

LINKAGES Nepal (October 2016 – March 2018), is part of the global LINKAGES project. LINKAGES Nepal is building on the learning and experiences from more than two decades of work conducted with USAID’s support. The project is designed to support global goals to control the epidemic and achieve an AIDS-free generation and to align with the Government of Nepal’s priorities; the new National HIV Strategic Plan 2016–2021; and USAID Nepal’s Country Development Cooperation Strategy Development Objective 3: Increased Human Capital, and more specifically Intermediate Result 3.2: A Healthier and Well-nourished Population. LINKAGES Nepal provides a continuum of HIV prevention, care, and treatment (CoPCT) services to female sex workers (FSWs) and clients of FSWs and people living with HIV (PLHIV) in 16 project districts and men who have sex with men (MSM), male sex workers (MSWs), and transgender (TG) people in five project districts of Nepal. (Please see the map for project districts). The project works

in close collaboration with the Government of Nepal, local nongovernmental organization (NGO) partners, and national networks of KPs and PLHIV and their community-based organizations (CBOs).

LINKAGES Nepal will (a) reach, test, treat, and retain; (b) mobilize local NGOs and national networks of KPs and their CBOs; (c) create links with government HIV facilities; and (d) use new and innovative methods and technologies to contribute to UNAIDS’ 90-90-90 by 2020 goal and ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030. LINKAGES Nepal uses the CoPCT as the strategic framework for its work. (Please refer to CoPCT cascade article on page 5 for more information).

The project activities will contribute to the following three global results areas of LINKAGES.

Result 1: Increased availability of comprehensive prevention, care, and treatment services, including reliable coverage across the continuum of care for KPs

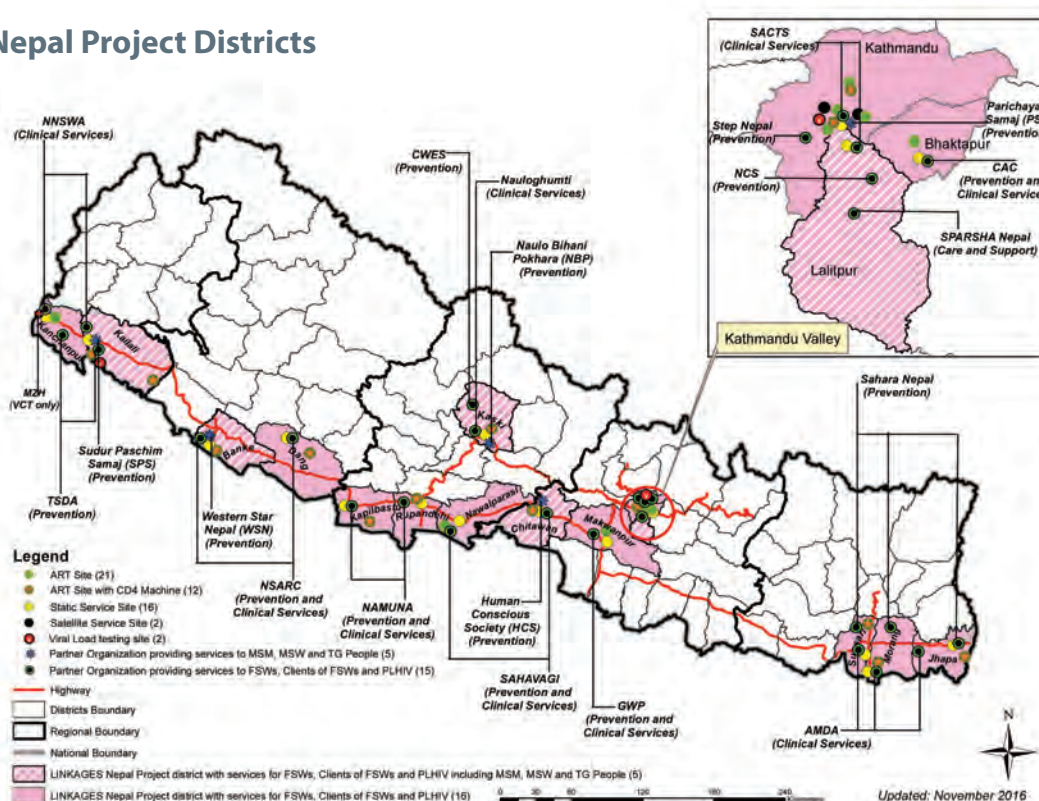
Result 2: Demand for comprehensive prevention, care, and treatment services among KPs enhanced and sustained

Result 3: Strengthened systems for planning, monitoring, evaluating, and ensuring the quality of programs for KPs

Key Indicators and Targets (Oct 2016 to Dec 2017)

Indicators	Target
Number of KPs reached for HIV prevention	142,700
Number of KPs received HIV testing and counseling (HTC) services	57,200
Number of KPs examined for sexually transmitted infections (STIs)	28,500
Number of PLHIV enrolled in care	639
Number of PLHIV enrolled in antiretroviral therapy (ART)	575
Number of condoms distributed	13.96 million

LINKAGES Nepal Project Districts



LINKAGES NEPAL PROJECT ACHIEVEMENTS

Q1-FY 2017

(Oct-Dec 2016)



TOTAL KEY POPULATION REACHED/RECEIVED

FSWs

Clients of FSWs

MSM

MSW

TG PEOPLE

SERVICES

HIV PREVENTION INTERVENTIONS



56,782

18,685

34,720

2,598

410

369

HIV TESTING AND COUNSELING (HTC) SERVICES



11,330

4,941

4,813

938

85

143

HIV-POSITIVE ADULT AND CHILDREN ENROLLED IN CARE



216

37

43

7

4

5

HIV-POSITIVE ADULT AND CHILDREN RECEIVING CARE AND SUPPORT OUTSIDE OF THE HEALTH FACILITY



86

27

21

4

1

5

SCREENED FOR SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS (STIs)



5,284

2,603

2,067

243

37

65

NUMBER OF PEOPLE TRAINED

HIV Counseling, Care, Support and Treatment Services Training

41 Health Workers-Government of Nepal

65 Health Workers-LINKAGES Nepal Project

Stigma and Discrimination Reduction and Gender-Transformative Training

150 Male

214 Female



LINKAGES Nepal Project's Innovative Interventions

Mobile Clinics to Reach the Unserved Key Populations

LINKAGES Nepal operates mobile clinics to bring HTC services closer to KP communities. Mobile clinics are operated at strategic locations selected by prevention outreach workers based on the number of KPs they've reached through their work. Between October and December 2016, 206 mobile clinics were conducted in the LINKAGES Nepal project districts. A total of 6,214 KPs

were tested for HIV, and of these, 16 tested positive for HIV. Eleven people were then linked to pre- Antiretroviral Therapy (ART)/ART-related services during the period. Operating mobile clinics that provide HTC services for KPs is one of the innovative approaches that LINKAGES Nepal is using to fast-track the country's response to HIV.

Comprehensive HIV Services for Men who have Sex with Men, Male Sex Workers, and Transgender People

LINKAGES Nepal is currently implementing HIV prevention, care, support, and treatment services specially targeted to MSM, MSWs and TG people in five districts (Banke, Chitwan, Lalitpur, Kaski, and Kailali) of Nepal. LINKAGES Nepal also partners with the Federation of Sexual and Gender Minorities Nepal (FSGMN)—a national network of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community—to provide national- and community-level support for program implementation. Of the total estimated number of Nepalese PLHIV in 2015, 11% were comprised of MSM, MSW, and TG people. Integrated Biological and Behavioral Surveillance (IBBS) surveys report an HIV prevalence of 2.4% among MSM and 5.6% among MSW in Kathmandu Valley (2015) and 8.2%, 11.8%, and

8.1% among MSM, MSWs, and TG respectively in Terai highway districts of Nepal (2016). In response, LINKAGES embraces approaches that reach high-risk MSM, MSWs, and TG people with HIV prevention, education, and referrals; HIV testing and STI diagnosis and treatment; and timely enrollment and retention in care and treatment services. LINKAGES Nepal partners run mobile and static clinics where staff have been trained to provide KP-friendly and KP-competent services that are also free of charge and easily accessible to these target populations. The prevention and clinical staff regularly follow up with the clients to retain them in services. Additionally, LINKAGES Nepal leads sessions with district stakeholders on reducing stigma and discrimination toward KPs.

Pareena's Profile

LINKAGES Nepal is pleased to have Pareena, a transgender woman as part of the team.

Pareena Chaudhari is the project coordinator for LINKAGES Nepal implementing partner Western Star Nepal, Banke District. Her role encompasses overall management and implementation of LINKAGES Nepal activities that provide HIV prevention, care, support, and treatment services for MSM, MSWs, and TG people in the district.

She has been actively advocating for the rights of the LGBTI community as a board member of District Women and Children Welfare Committee and the FSGMN and as a member of a gender-based violence committee led by the District Police Office, Banke district. She is the past president of Western Star Nepal, and she is actively involved in reporting human rights violations and gender-based violence against LGBTI people as the Human Rights Officer in a Norwegian Embassy-funded project. Under her leadership, Banke District Development Committee (DDC) built the first public toilet for third gender people—a first of its kind in Nepal. She was also actively engaged in advocating with local government authorities to officially acknowledge third gender identity. She continues to be a role model for the members of her community and explains that self-stigma, fear, and denial among the LGBTI community are major barriers to visiting clinics and getting tested for HIV. She believes that sensitization on the rights of LGBTI people and skill-based capacity-building opportunities for them are of utmost importance.



“

Some MSM/MSWs and TG people do not feel comfortable with other staff members. I feel more connected with our community people, as I interact with them every day and discuss with them their issues and challenges while accessing health services, including HIV services. Therefore, I would like to thank LINKAGES Project for this opportunity,” Pareena said

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The HIV Continuum of Prevention, Care and Treatment (CoPCT) Cascade

In Nepal, and around the world, there is a need to identify HIV cases early, enroll people in treatment without delay, and ensure close follow-up so that clients remain on treatment. LINKAGES Nepal is using the LINKAGES HIV CoPCT cascade as a way to monitor and show, in visual form, the numbers of individuals who are accessing CoPCT services at each step of the continuum. The CoPCT cascade powerfully identifies “leaks” in the system and allows us to assess their magnitude which in turn helps identify the factors causing them. With this information, implementers at site, district, and national levels can target limited resources toward effective interventions that improve the health of HIV-positive individuals, lower the amount of virus in their bodies, and prevent new infections in the long term. Knowing where the drop-offs are most pronounced is vital for knowing where, when, and how to intervene to break the cycle of HIV transmission and achieve the 90-90-90 goals.

In addition to monitoring whether those who test positive are receiving the care and treatment they need, it is also

necessary to ensure primary prevention services among those who test HIV negative. These services include regular reengagement so that they are exposed to combination prevention approaches, peer-led behavior counseling, condom/lubricant promotion and use, bi-annual HIV testing, STI prevention and treatment services, harm reduction interventions, and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) as appropriate. The LINKAGES HIV CoPCT cascade also emphasizes the need to address both the unsupportive environments that KPs live in as well as capacity gaps in organizations led by and serving KPs, both of which can hinder KPs’ access to quality services.

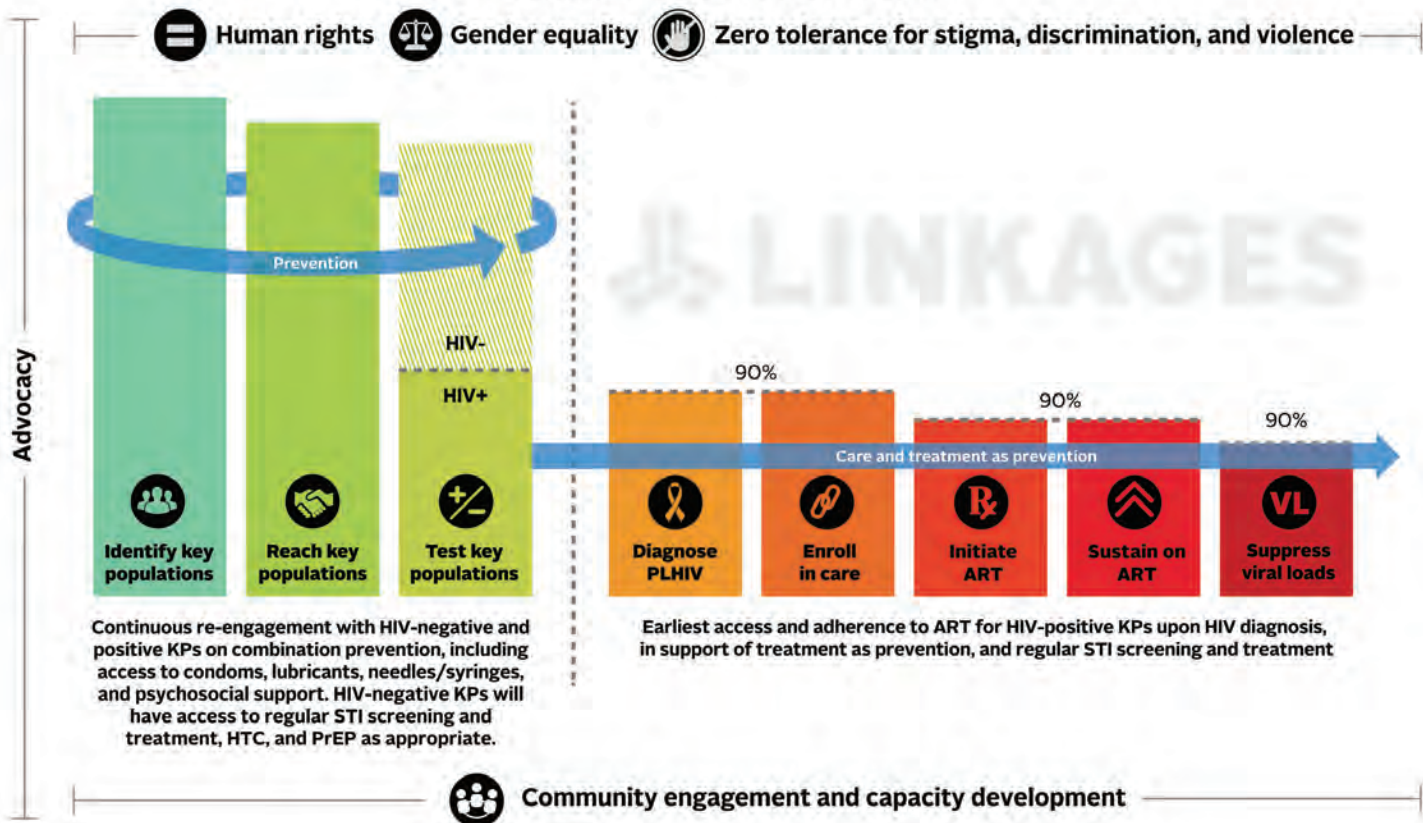
LINKAGES Nepal is prioritizing the reach-test-treat-retain approach, whereby the project identifies and reaches KPs at highest risk of acquiring HIV, provides testing, ensures links to treatment, and supports the retention of individuals who are on treatment. The project works in close collaboration with the Government of Nepal and KPs themselves to develop enhanced models for maintaining improved prevention, care, and treatment programs.



LINKAGES Continuum of Prevention, Care, and Treatment (CoPCT) Cascade of HIV Services for Key Populations

ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

- Human rights
- Gender equality
- Zero tolerance for stigma, discrimination, and violence



National Condom Day

On October 21, 2016, the LINKAGES Nepal project commemorated the 22nd National Condom Day with the slogan “Universal Access to Condom for Dual Protection” in coordination with government and nongovernment stakeholders at the district and national levels. The implementing partner agencies organized a rally and condom-blowing competition; distributed condoms for free; disseminated messages about correct and consistent use of condoms and their importance for preventing HIV and unintended pregnancy; and exhibited information, education, and communication materials. In Kathmandu valley, LINKAGES Nepal also participated in a press meeting organized by NCASC. The Secretary, Ministry of Health; Director General, Department of Health Services, and

Director, NCASC attended the press meeting and highlighted the importance of commemorating National Condom Day. The “Condom Song,” created by a local youth initiative, was also unveiled.



29th World AIDS Day

On December 1, 2016—with the leadership of NCASC, Ministry of Health, Government of Nepal, and in partnership with key stakeholders of the national HIV response—LINKAGES Nepal commemorated the 29th World AIDS Day. Honorable Mr. Gagan Thapa, Minister of Health and Honorable Mr. Tara Man Gurung, State Minister attended the event as the chief and special guest, respectively, demonstrating their commitment. Senior officials of the Government of Nepal, UN agencies, external development partners, USAID Nepal, LINKAGES Nepal, and representatives from international NGOs were the main guests of the program. Representatives of national networks of KPs and PLHIV, as well as civil society organizations, also participated as guests.

During the event, the Honorable Minister of Health and Honorable State Minister unveiled the National HIV Strategic Plan (NHSP) 2016-2021 and Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Guidelines for HIV Response in Nepal, marking major milestones for Nepal’s HIV response efforts.

USAID Nepal’s director of the Office of Health and Education applauded the achievements made by Government of Nepal in the health sector, highlighted USAID’s continued support in the national HIV response, and expressed that USAID was pleased to support NCASC for the NHSP 2016-2021 development process and to lead the process of developing PPP Guidelines for HIV Response. LINKAGES Nepal implementing partner organizations in all 16 project districts commemorated the World AIDS Day 2016 in collaboration with local government and non-government stakeholders.



The National HIV Strategic Plan 2016-2021, commits to a fast-track approach that will accelerate action by focusing strategic investments in HIV programs for and with key populations, in priority geographical areas. It ensures that everyone can access services for HIV prevention, treatment, care, and support-leaving no one behind. The USAID-funded Saath-Saath Project, the predecessor of LINKAGES Nepal project, had actively participated in and contributed to its development and finalization process.

The Public-Private Partnership Guidelines for HIV Response in Nepal is the first national document to guide collaboration between public and private sectors for improving the quality of HIV-related service delivery to help the country achieve 90-90-90 targets. The guidelines complement the NHSP 2016-2021. NCASC led the development of the PPP Guidelines with technical and financial support from the USAID-funded Saath-Saath Project.

Laying the Foundation for Initiation and Smooth Implementation of LINKAGES Nepal

October 1, 2016 marked the beginning of the USAID- and PEPFAR-funded LINKAGES Nepal project, which is part of the global LINKAGES project. The project is being implemented in 16 districts through 24 implementing partner agencies to provide HIV CoPCT services to KPs and PLHIV. To lay a strong foundation for the initiation and smooth implementation of the project, LINKAGES Nepal Project organized:

- Orientation for the project staff and implementing partner agencies.
- District-level meeting with the local authorities and stakeholders.
- Meeting at the national level with the NCASC and key stakeholders of the national HIV response.
- Basic training for program and M&E staff, service providers, and outreach staff.

The goals of the project, scope, coverage, implementation modality, strategies, expected results,



timeframe, and budget were shared with the stakeholders at the district and national levels. The stakeholders appreciated receiving this information and committed to support the project. Likewise, 288 staff members of the implementing partner agencies were trained on key skills required to effectively implement the project.

Rapid community assessments (RCAs) were conducted in all 16 districts of the LINKAGES Nepal Project. In collaboration with Jagriti Mahila Maha Sangh (JMMS)'s member CBOs and FSGMN, LINKAGES Nepal mapped FSW hotspots and MSM/TG People cruising sites and developed population size estimates. The findings of the RCAs are being used in program planning and mobilization of resources. The RCA data also will be used to construct a CoPCT cascade of each program district. The findings of the RCA were shared with national-level stakeholders at NCASC and are being shared with district-level stakeholders.



Snapshot of RCA Findings

FSWs in 16 LINKAGES Nepal Project Districts

- Average estimated number: 38,420 spread over 704 hotspot areas.
- Largest estimated number: 9,368 in Kathmandu spread over 128 hotspot areas.
- Smallest estimated number: 650 in Makwanpur district spread over 28 hotspot areas.

MSM, MSWs, and TG People in five LINKAGES Nepal Project Districts

- Average estimated number: 14,324 spread over 129 hotspot areas.
- Largest estimated number: 4,257 in Kailali district spread over 43 hotspot areas.
- Smallest estimated number: 1,583 in Kaski district spread over 12 hotspot areas.

Technical inputs to Finalize National Consolidated Guidelines for Treating and Preventing HIV in Nepal, 2016

LINKAGES Nepal provided technical input (in line with the latest WHO consolidated guidelines on the use of ARV and HIV testing services and the new NHSP 2016-2021) to finalize the 2016 National Consolidated Guidelines for Testing and Treating HIV in Nepal. The guidelines cover how to implement the test and treat approach and also open the door for new initiatives—test for triage, and HIV self-testing and pre-exposure prophylaxis. LINKAGES Nepal contributed through the HIV Technical Working Group (HIV TWG) and a national symposium and also prepared three chapters of the guidelines: ART monitoring, adherence and retention, and laboratory services. The guidelines will be finalized by January 2017 and implemented beginning February 2017.

Updating of the ARV Drugs Dispensing Tool (ADT) Software for NCASC

In October 2016, the LINKAGES Nepal project revised, updated, and delivered the ADT software to the NCASC. With coordination by NCASC, LINKAGES Nepal helped ART centers to install the updated ADT software and also monitored and updated the status of the centers' data entry.

Technical Assistance to NCASC for National Size Estimation of KPs

NCASC is in the process of finalizing national size estimates of KPs. LINKAGES Nepal provided technical assistance in data analysis, including adjustment, extrapolation, and triangulation of results obtained from the study. Thereafter, data triangulation and validation was carried out in a series of consultations with the national network of KPs.

Collaboration with Youth Vision and Mainline Foundation

LINKAGES Nepal collaborated with Youth Vision and the Mainline Foundation and trained outreach staff of implementing partner agencies and Youth Vision about overlapping risk behaviors among FSWs and women who inject drugs in Kathmandu valley. The training also equipped the participants to provide HIV prevention education and referrals. The training has paved the way for further coordination and linkages.



Meeting on the Development, Analysis, and Use of a Continuum of HIV Prevention, Care, Support and Treatment Cascade

LINKAGES Nepal organized a meeting with key government and nongovernment stakeholders about CoPCT cascade development, analysis, and use. A staff member from LINKAGES headquarters presented on the development of a CoPCT cascade framework, leaks in the cascade, cascade flow and its implications for program implementers, and examples of cascades from several countries, including Nepal. The meeting was particularly timely, because the country has recently endorsed new the NHSP 2016-2021 and also requested that LINKAGES Nepal lead and provide support to develop the national cascade of services.



Visitors Log

USAID Nepal:

The USAID Nepal team—led by Ms. Ivana Lohar, Team Leader, Family Planning, HIV and Social Marketing—visited the Kaski District in November 2016. The team observed clinical set-up and procedures and an outreach educational session by a LINKAGES implementing partner agency. The team also visited the ART center at Western Regional Hospital.



NCASC and National Public Health Laboratory (NPHL):

LINKAGES Nepal, NCASC, and NPHL collaboratively conducted supportive supervision and monitoring of ART delivery at the project's service sites in Chitwan and Kaski districts and provided onsite coaching and mentoring for HIV clinical and laboratory services and a logistics management system.



District Public Health Office (DPHO) and District Development Committee (DDC):

In December 2016, DPHO and DDC personnel visited the LINKAGES Nepal's implementing partner agency in Chitwan, Kailali, and Kanchanpur districts. The team observed clinical services, the recording and reporting system (including the health and logistics management information system) and interacted with project staff and beneficiaries.

Technical Assistance from LINKAGES Project Headquarters:
In December 2016, Virupax Ranebennur, a senior technical advisor from the LINKAGES headquarters in FHI 360's Washington DC office, visited LINKAGES Nepal and provided technical assistance on the M&E system, process, and tools.

Congratulations:

- 1) Jacqueline McPherson, Regional Director, FHI 360 Asia Pacific Region
- 2) Bishnu Sapkota, Country Director, FHI 360 Nepal
- 3) Indu Adhikary, Deputy Project Director, LINKAGES Nepal
- 4) Sajani Limbu, Program Officer-SBC and New Technologies, LINKAGES Nepal
- 5) Luna Ghimire, M&E Specialist, LINKAGES Nepal
- 6) Bharat Man Shrestha, Program Specialist-MSM & TG program, LINKAGES Nepal
- 7) All those staff who were transferred and/or promoted to LINKAGES Nepal Project

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